

# THE ELECTION IS OVER

By PAUL F. LAZARSFELD

How MUCH does the campaign matter? Do all the speeches made, all the millions spent, affect the outcome appreciably? How much of the vote is really available?

Politicians and scholars have long had their answers to these questions, but the answers were necessarily pure speculation. In this article Paul Lazarsfeld, Director of Columbia University's Office of Radio Research, gives

another kind of answer—one based on a good deal more than speculation. It will intrigue scholars, as it may well disconcert politicians.

The article is a summary of the book, *Votes in the Making*, by Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet, a forthcoming publication of the American Council of Public Affairs.

**I**N AN IMPORTANT SENSE, modern Presidential campaigns are over before they begin.

This is the conclusion that emerges from an intensive study of Erie County, Ohio, during the campaign of 1940. Erie County has a population of about 46,000 people, half of whom live in the industrial town of Sandusky and half in the surrounding rural area. The county was chosen for analysis because for decades it has rested nearest the national average in the quadrennial national elections.

The technique employed was not the usual one of polling different representative groups at different times. The same representative sample of 600 people was interviewed seven times, every month beginning with May and ending the week after election day. Four other comparable samples of 600 people each were interviewed at different times during this period, partly for control purposes and partly to get a broader statistical base on the more crucial issues.<sup>1</sup>

In the course of the study the members of the main panel were asked approximately 250 questions. A number of these questions were repeated at each interview: whom they intended to vote for, whom they expected to win, etc. If the vote intention of a respondent had changed between two interviews, he was subjected to a more detailed inquiry centering on why he had changed his mind.

Three types of information resulted from this polling: (1) the kind of material which comes from any regular public opinion poll, with

<sup>1</sup> Special tabulation showed that the repeated interviews, in themselves, had no influence on opinions. In regard to vote intention, for example, the repeated interviews induced people to make up their minds more quickly but did not change the proportion of Democrats and Republicans as compared with the control groups that were not interviewed repeatedly.



the distinction that more detailed questions than usual were asked; (2) information on the same respondents obtained at different time periods (this made possible a new kind of analysis: studying what happens to a declared political opinion with the passage of time and under different propaganda conditions); (3) the detailed reasons of those people who changed their vote intention.

#### SOCIAL GROUPING AND THE VOTE

Throughout Erie County there was the usual increase in Democratic votes as the income scale went down. On the same socio-economic level rural people voted more Republican than the residents of Sandusky. Religion played a very large role. On each socio-economic level the proportion of Republican voters among the Protestants was two to three times as large as among Catholics. The age divisions were striking. Among Protestants, the older the group, the more Republicans; among Catholics, the older the group, the more Democrats. The younger generation seemed to have a tendency to vote against the trend prevailing in its own socio-religious circle. If socio-economic level was held constant, occupations did not make much difference, although white-collar workers on each level tended to vote slightly less Democratic than other workers.<sup>2</sup>

There was no marked sex difference among the Roosevelt and Willkie voters, but there was great variation in the proportions of men and women who said they intended to vote. In October, just prior to the election, about 6 per cent of the men and 20 per cent of the women said they did not expect to vote. (It is usually overlooked that the vast majority of "Don't Know's," just prior to an election, are women who end up by not voting or by going to the polls under the influence of their husbands.) Especially striking was the large number of female citizens who bluntly stated that they did not see why women should vote at all.

It became plain, then, that three social factors—religious affiliation, economic status, and residence (urban or rural)—could be combined into a crude *index of political predisposition* (IPP). Thus people could be classified according to whether their social characteristics made it likely that they would vote Democratic or Republican. Chart I, for

<sup>2</sup> The marked correlation between social groups and votes raised the question whether the voters themselves saw the election in class terms. Here again the more detailed interviews proved valuable. The explanations of the voters made plain that a considerable proportion saw the difference between Republicans and Democrats as one of conflicting class interests.



example, shows that wealthy Protestant farmers, who would have the lowest (i.e., Republican) IPP, had 74 per cent Republicans among their voters, whereas poor Sandusky Catholics, whose IPP was highest, had only 17 per cent Republican voters.

The results of Chart I are based on the interviews made in May with 3,000 people and, of course, pertain only to those respondents who had a definite vote intention at the time. Presumably people with more permanent political allegiances are influenced by their social situation, whereas those who form their decisions in the course of the campaign are freer in their choice. This, however, did not prove to be the case. One group, who might be called the crystallizers, entered the study as "Don't Know's" and made up their minds only during the campaign. These crystallizers were classified by their IPP scores according to

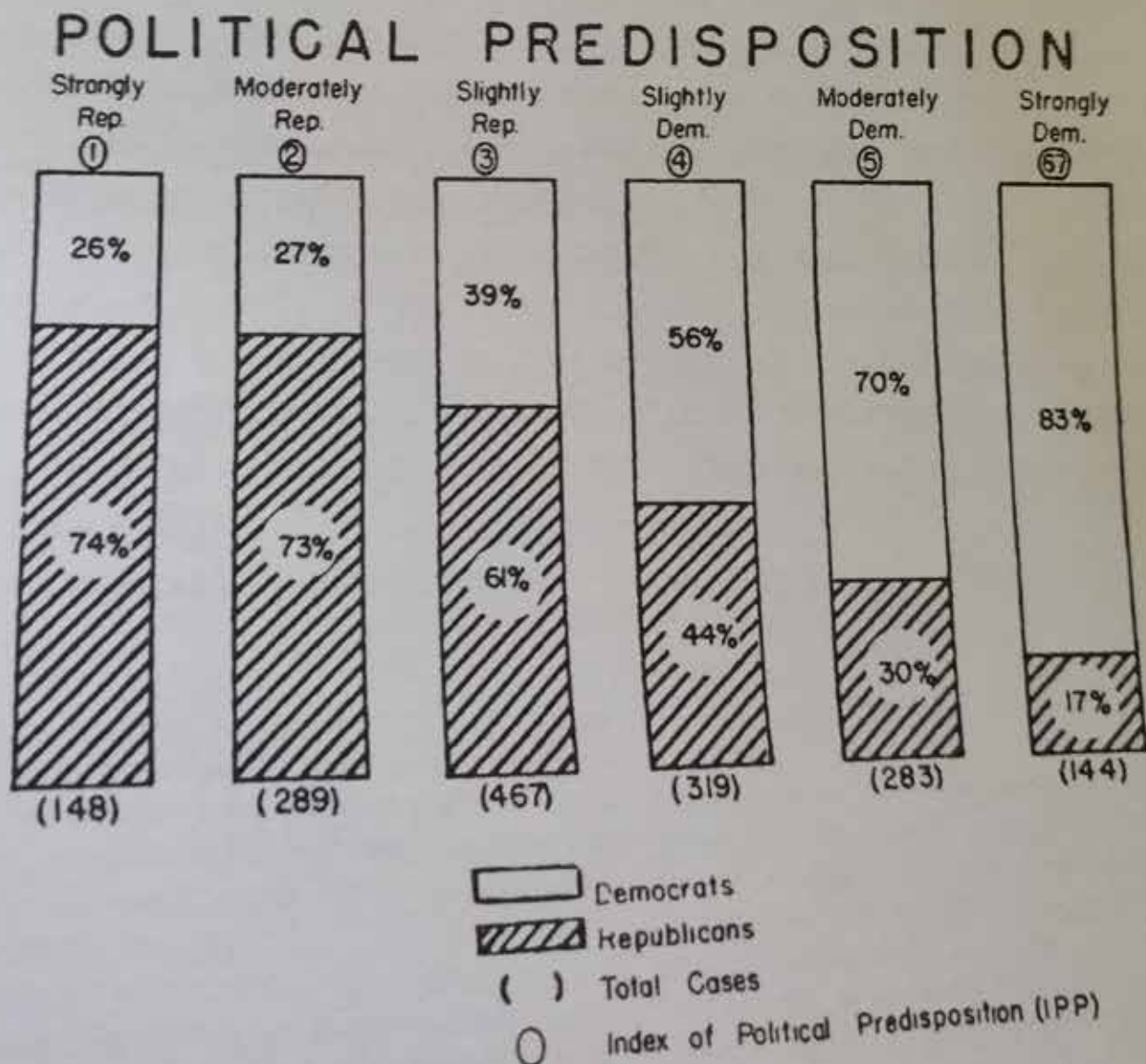


CHART I

This chart illustrates the high correlation of the index of political predisposition to vote intention. High SES level, affiliation with the Protestant religion, and rural residence predispose a voter for the Republican party; the opposites of these factors make for Democratic predisposition.



whether their social characteristics indicated a Republican or a Democratic predisposition. Seventy-six per cent of those whose IPP suggested Republicanism finally voted for that party; only 26 per cent of those with a Democratic IPP voted Republican. The same is true for the people who underwent actual party shifts. The majority changed so that their final vote was more in accordance with their political predisposition than was their vote intention at the beginning of the campaign. There is a mass of additional evidence that as the campaign goes on people are more and more inclined to vote for the party which prevails in their social group. What the campaign seems to do is to activate the political predispositions of people.

One way in which this activation comes about can be traced by studying the common media of communication to which people are exposed. In the course of the repeated interviews we were able to build up a fairly extensive inventory of the items our respondents had read or listened to at different times during the campaign. Chart II pertains to those panel members who did not have a vote intention in August; they are classified according to their political predispositions as indicated by their social characteristics. Clearly their propaganda exposure was closely related to their IPP score. The campaign propaganda does not

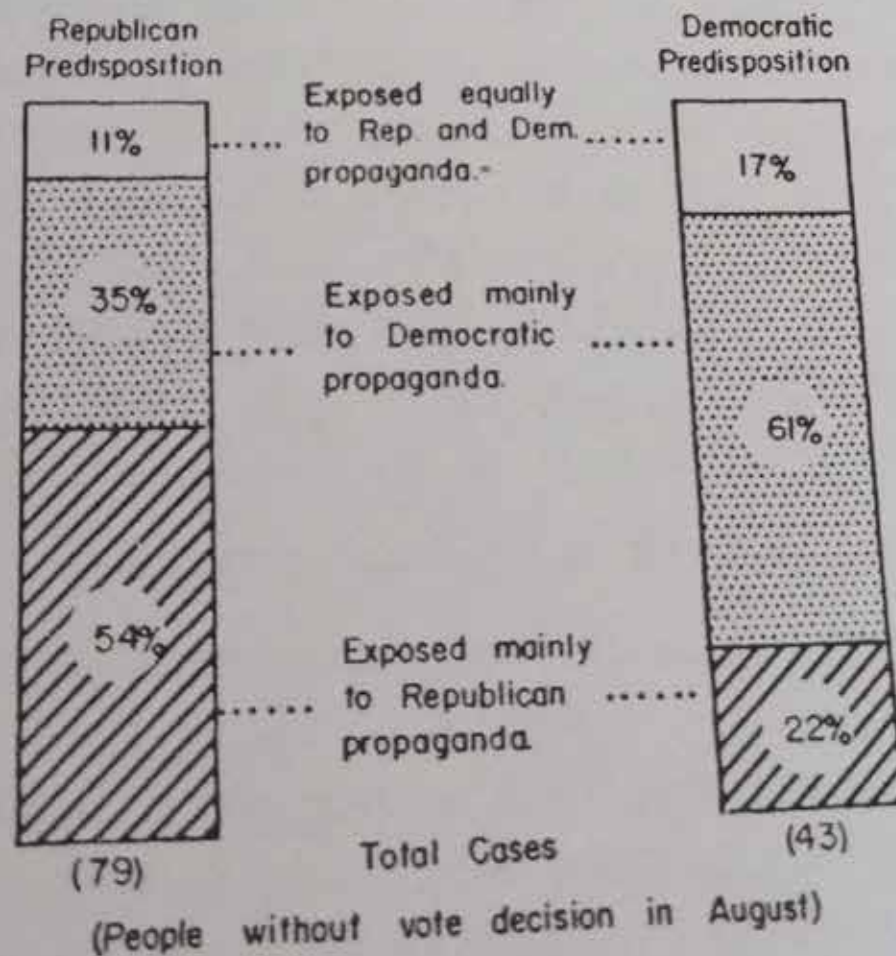


CHART II

People who have not yet decided about their vote expose themselves more to propaganda of that party to which they are predisposed by background.



reach the citizen in the proportion in which it is offered. Social environment sifts propaganda; the undecided ones are not easily reached by the propaganda of the party to which their group is generally hostile.

Only about 4 per cent of the Erie County families contained members who had different vote intentions; and when this was the case, the vote intention of each single member was unstable and easily susceptible to influence. The sample was not large enough to permit a study of special social organizations, such as fraternities, Rotary groups, etc. But an interesting result is obtained if people who did and those who did not belong to such organizations are compared.<sup>3</sup> The general finding is that belonging to an organization accentuates political predisposition. Members of the higher socio-economic levels were more likely to vote Republican if they belonged to a social organization. Those on lower socio-economic levels were more likely to vote Democratic if they were members of such formal groups. Superimposed on this result, however, is another trend. If a person of low income happened to belong to an organization the majority of which belonged to higher social strata, then he was more likely to vote Republican.

One other observation furnishes evidence for what might be called the social character of political behavior. One always found people who had a contradictory opinion pattern. They intended to vote for one party but held opinions on one or two specific issues which were more characteristic of the other party. At the time of the next interview many of these respondents had become consistent, inasmuch as their vote intention and their opinion on a specific issue followed the prevailing pattern. In the large majority of cases the people who started out with an inconsistent opinion pattern kept their vote intention but shifted on the specific issue to the opinion prevailing in the political group with which they had associated themselves. Material of this kind bolsters the conclusion that people vote with the social group to which they belong and that these groups in turn are strongly determined by a few basic social characteristics.

#### RADIO AND PRINT IN THE CAMPAIGN

If the vote of the people who make up their minds during the campaign is so strongly determined by predispositions, then we cannot

<sup>3</sup> Such a comparison has to be carried through separately on different socio-economic levels because otherwise we would be misled by the fact that the more well-to-do people are, the more likely they are to belong to formal associations.



expect formal media of communication to have a very great effect. What do we know on this subject?

Detailed analyses were made of the radio, newspapers, and magazines in the early, middle, and late part of the campaign. The content of the local newspapers was about 2-1 favorable toward the Republican Party and, surprisingly enough, the radio had about the same ratio. This is partly due to the fact that the Republicans bought more time on the air for speeches. It also came about because the opposition candidate had more news value. The magazines were the most partisan medium in favor of the Republicans (3-1). In the early part of the campaign they published a considerable number of articles on Willkie, who was a comparatively new figure and whose career lent itself especially well to magazine treatment.

A considerable part of the population was scarcely touched by the political content of the media. In October, when the campaign was nearing its peak, people were shown the front page of the newspaper they regularly read, a list of political articles appearing in the mass magazines with the highest circulation in the area, and a list of the five main radio speeches which had been on the air the day preceding the interview. Chart III shows the striking results. Similar inquiries at earlier stages of the campaign showed even less exposure. Except for an extraordinary occasion, it is safe to say that during an average day of the campaign more than half the sample were not exposed to any political topics in the mass media of communication. Characteristically enough, the people who read political items in the newspapers were also those who listened to political speeches. Those who had not been reached by propaganda at the time of one interview usually proved to be still unexposed at the time of the second interview.

The importance of this lack of reading and listening on the part of about half of the population is further accentuated by two facts. The people who read and listened were usually those who had well-established political opinions and affiliations. Those less set in their ways and, therefore, theoretically more susceptible to influences, were also less likely to be reached through the formal media of communication. In addition, a very marked exposure bias was found. For those who had already formed a vote intention, it was found that the political color of their exposure had a correlation of about .6 with their vote intention.



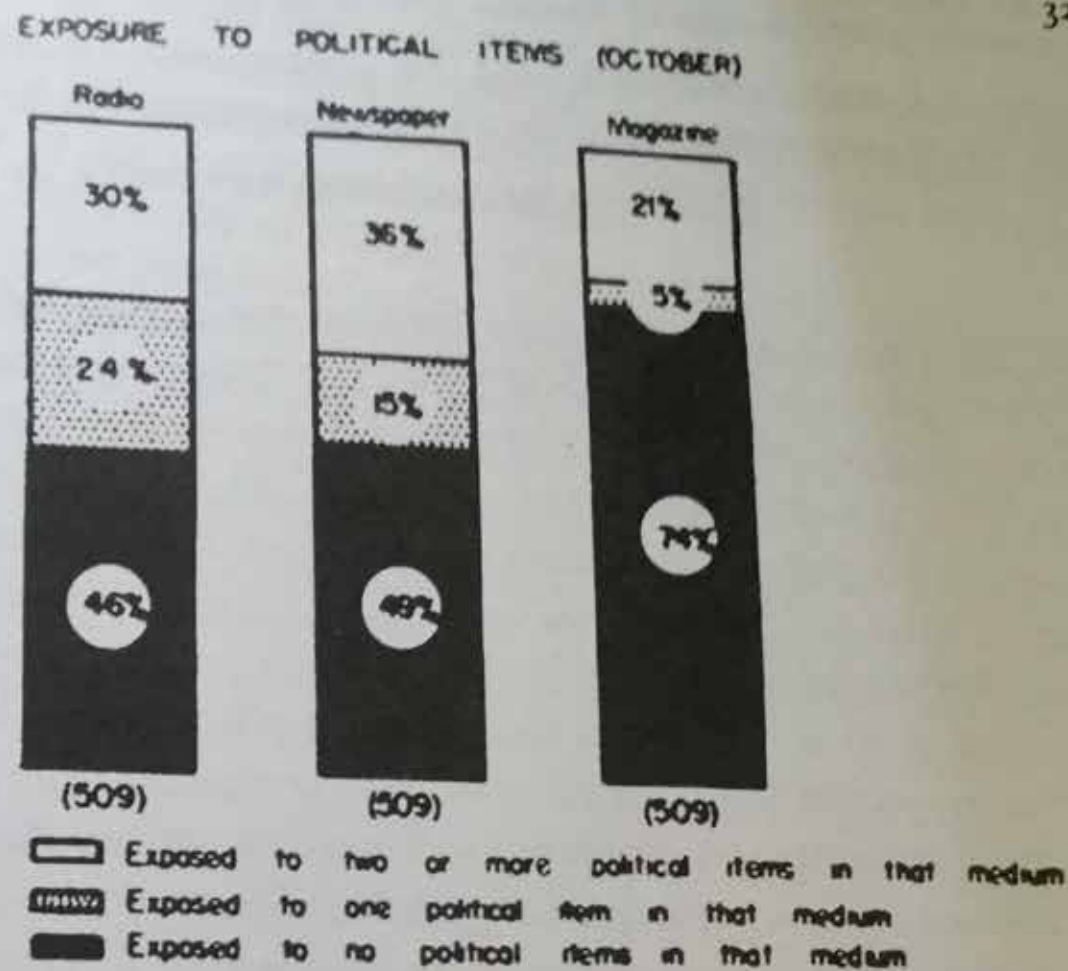


CHART III

A considerable proportion of voters is untouched by the political content of radio speeches or newspaper and magazine articles.

The more interest people had in the election, incidentally, the higher was this exposure bias.

A number of comparative remarks can be made about the role of radio and newspapers. The radio is probably more effective than newspapers. The measure of effectiveness here is the number of people who can give concrete instances of how at some point in their deliberation a newspaper or a radio item entered as a conscious factor. Content analysis showed that local newspapers cut reports of speeches short and so gave little room to direct or indirect argumentation. They had to lay stress on news, and the news of the campaign comes from actual campaign events, predictions as to outcome, and reports on people who have taken a definite stand. About two-thirds of the political content of newspapers was concerned with such campaign matters. On the other hand, over the radio candidates spoke for themselves, and much time was given to actual argumentation. No wonder, then, that this kind of material lent itself to closer integration with the thinking people did for themselves. In the 1940 campaign, there was an interesting relationship be-



tween supporters of the two parties and the two main media of communication. We have seen that the content of press and radio was equally strongly favorable toward the Republican side, but in the mind of the audience, the situation was different. The following table lists a number of questions and percentage answers by which people's attitudes to media were gauged:

<i>Questions</i>	<i>Republicans</i>		<i>Democrats</i>	
	<i>Newspaper</i>	<i>Radio</i>	<i>Newspaper</i>	<i>Radio</i>
1. "Which do you think is closer to the truth (more impartial)—the news you get in the newspapers or on the radio?"	41%	32%	30%	39%
2. "Where do you find ideas on the coming election which agree most closely with your own ideas?"	35	37	26	39

Note that in answer to both questions the Democrats considered the radio more their medium, while the Republicans leaned toward the newspapers. And these differences repeated themselves at other points of the study. Republicans read more political items in the newspapers, Democrats listened to more radio speeches. And when it came to explaining changes in votes, again people who during the campaign decided to vote for Willkie mentioned newspapers more frequently as influences, while respondents who finally cast their vote for Roosevelt reported more incidents where the radio played a role. All these differences, moreover, hold true for all educational levels, thus eliminating any effect of the lower educational status of the average Democratic voter.<sup>4</sup> Obviously a considerable selection bias exists because people tend to expose themselves to the side with which they agree anyhow. The stereotype of the impartial voter weighing all the evidence offered by both political parties is just another political myth.

#### THE ROLE OF PERSONAL CONTACTS

The strongest influence discovered was face-to-face contact. Whenever the respondents were asked to report on their recent exposure to campaign communications of all kinds, political discussions were men-

<sup>4</sup> The fact that more than 80 per cent of the newspapers all over the country were in favor of the Republican candidate cannot be a complete explanation for the above finding, for the three local papers in Sandusky were evenly divided, one for each major party and one neutral. It is more likely that the regular and skillful use which Roosevelt makes of the radio has built up the idea of radio as more friendly to the Democratic side.



tioned more frequently than exposure to radio or print. On any average day at least 10 per cent more people participated in discussions about the election—either actively or passively—than listened to a major speech or read about campaign items in a newspaper. And this coverage “bonus” came from just those people who had not yet made a final decision as to how they would vote—those who were still open to influence. Three-fourths of the respondents who at one time had not expected to vote but who were finally “dragged in” mentioned personal influences. After the election, the voters were given a check list of “sources from which they got most of the information or impressions that caused them to form their judgment.” Those who had made some change during the campaign mentioned friends or members of their family relatively more frequently than did the respondents who kept a constant vote intention all through the campaign.

It is worthwhile at this point to introduce a table cross-tabulating people's vote intention on the eve of election day as against the actual vote decision they reported right after November 5th.<sup>5</sup>

<i>Actual Vote</i>	<i>Vote Intention in October</i>				<i>Total</i>
	<i>Rep.</i>	<i>Dem.</i>	<i>Don't know</i>	<i>Don't expect to vote</i>	
Republican	215	7	4	6	232
Democrat	4	144	12	0	160
Didn't vote	10	16	6	59	91
Total persons	229	167	22	65	483

Even at this late date there occurred a considerable turnover, although from a general political point of view most of the changes cancelled each other. The main point here is that many of the changers did not hesitate to report personal influence. We can take as an example the sixteen people who had no definite vote intention in October but

<sup>5</sup> The translation of vote intentions into voting action as discussed here and as traced in the table has implications of interest for those who want to understand the workings of the regular public opinion polls. It is the task of an election forecast to infer from the intended vote prior to the election the actual vote after the election. Some of the major hazards of making election predictions are nicely exemplified here: (1) the difficulty of predicting what the “Don't Know's” will do on Election Day; (2) the fact that those people who had intended to vote Democratic were more likely not to vote in the end than those who had intended to vote Republican; and (3) the fact that all of the people who voted despite an original intention not to vote, voted for Willkie.



who went to the polls on election day. Half of them report incidents such as the following: "I was taken to the polls by worker who insisted that I go. . . . My husband persuaded me to vote for Willkie. He was opposed to the third term. . . . The lady where I worked wanted me to vote—took me to the polls and they all voted Republican so I did, too. . . . My parents are Republican but I didn't have any interest in the election at all. . . ."

A more detailed study of all of the cases interviewed in the course of the campaign permits us to list the factors which make personal contacts so influential:

- a. Personal contacts are more flexible. The clever campaign worker, professional or amateur, can fit the argument to the person. He can shift his tactics as he analyzes the reactions of the other person.
- b. Face-to-face contacts make the consequences of yielding to or resisting an argument immediate and personal. The mass media can only intimate or describe future rewards or punishments; the living person can create them at once in the form of smiles or sneers.
- c. More people rely upon personal contacts to help them pick out arguments which are relevant for their own good in political affairs than rely upon the more remote and impersonal newspaper and radio. They are used to relying upon the judgment and evaluation of the respected people among their associates.
- d. Personal contacts are more casual. If we read or tune in to a speech, we usually do so purposefully and in doing so have a definite mental attitude which tinges our receptiveness. On the other hand, people we meet for reasons other than political discussions are more likely to catch us unprepared and so cut through our barriers more easily.
- e. Finally, personal contacts can get a voter to the polls without relying to any extent upon comprehension of the issues of the election—something the formal media can do less easily.

It is possible to characterize the people from whom much of the personal talk about the election came. By appropriate questions and by getting advice from people who knew the community well, about 20 per cent of the sample were spotted as opinion leaders. These were not



necessarily prominent community figures; they were simply people who were likely to be asked their opinion and were eager to give their advice. The following table indicates how these opinion leaders were found in all walks of life.

<i>Occupational group</i>	<i>Number in sample</i>	<i>Percentage of opinion leaders</i>
Professional	17	35
Proprietary, managerial	28	25
Clerical	21	33
Commercial, sales	16	44
Skilled workers	37	35
Semi-skilled workers	31	32
Unskilled workers	47	23
Farmers	46	15
Housewives	230	13
Unemployed	13	15
Retired	23	35

In answer to all relevant questions these opinion leaders showed themselves more involved in the campaign than the rest of the population—the largest difference being in the extent to which they read political matter in magazines. It therefore makes sense to talk of a two-step movement of propaganda. In a somewhat crude generalization, one can say that the formal media reach mainly the opinion leaders, who in turn pass it on to the rest of the people by word of mouth.

#### THE AVAILABLE VOTE

All this raises the practical question: who are the people who make their decision during the campaign and thus are available for propaganda? Restricting this analysis to the respondents who actually went to the polls, we find that Erie County split as follows: about one-half the voting sample made up its mind before May and did not change its vote intention; another 30 per cent made up their minds as soon as the candidates were nominated by the conventions; the other 20 per cent hesitated long enough to be considered at least theoretically susceptible to propaganda influences. (This count excludes the 20 per cent of the total sample who were psychologically so outside of the campaign that they did not vote at all.)

Two facts are closely related to the time of decision. The first is interest in the election. The less interested people were, the later they



made up their minds. In the course of the study we used a considerable number of indices by which interest in the election could be reasonably measured. It turned out that people's own statement as to whether they had a great, a moderate, or no interest in the election was about as good an index as could be found. In Chart IV, therefore, the panel members are divided into those who exhibited great interest and those whose interest was less strong. For both groups, the chart indicates at what time they formed the vote intention with which they went to the polls. (This chart, therefore, contains only the panel members who actually voted.) By comparing the two bars we see that about two-thirds of the greatly interested people knew in May for whom they would vote, but among those with less interest less than half were that constant in their vote intention. Twice as many with less interest made their final decision between September and November. In the later phases of the campaign, then, the propagandists have to address themselves more and more to the least interested sector of the population.

People susceptible to campaign influences can be characterized in still another way. It is possible to set up a number of criteria of what can be called "cross-pressures." We saw, for instance, that well-to-do people and Protestants were much more likely to vote Republican than poor

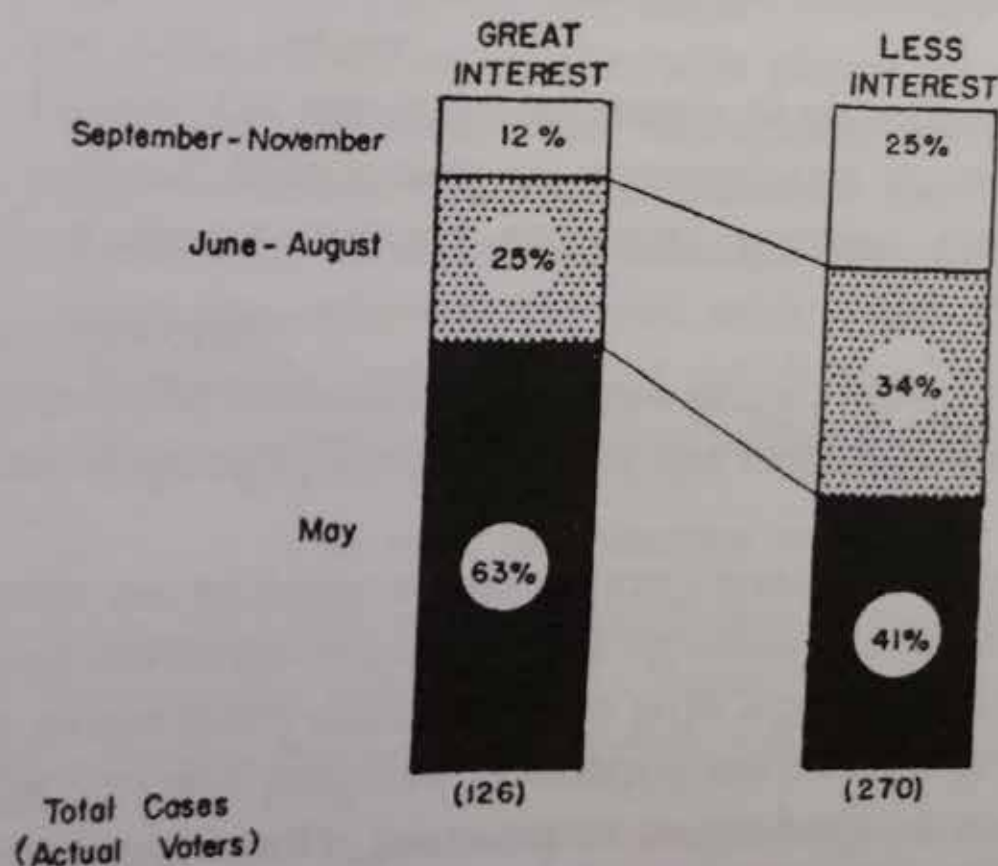


CHART IV

People greatly interested in the election make their final vote decision earlier than less interested people.



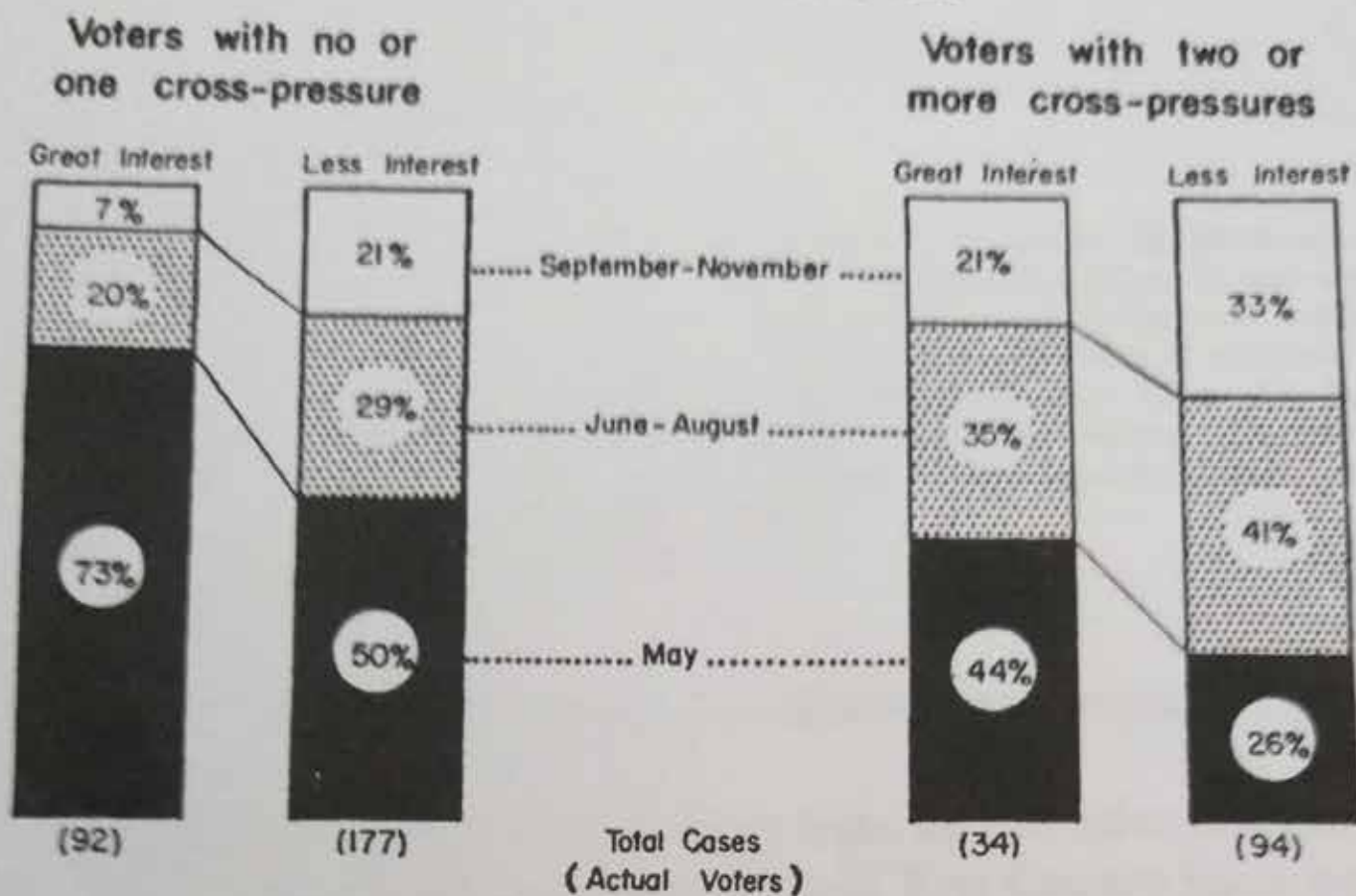


CHART V

Both cross-pressures and lack of interest delay the final vote decision. Separately, they show about equal strength. Their joint effect is especially strong.

people and Catholics. A well-to-do Catholic, therefore, was under cross-pressures. Another index of cross-pressure can be developed by dividing the respondents into those whose family members are all in agreement and those with a political deviate or, at least, someone who had not yet made up his mind. Another type of cross-pressure exists around a citizen who intends to vote for a party but does not agree with all its tenets. By such considerations we were able to develop a cross-pressure index which consisted of six elements. Only 15 per cent had no cross-pressures at all. From Chart V it can be seen that the people who waited for the campaign before making a final vote decision were quite clearly those who live under the greatest variety of such pressures. The table is set up so that it is possible to compare the effect of cross-pressures independently of the role of interest. By comparing, for instance, the first and third bar in Chart V we see that if people had great interest in the election, they still decided their vote later if they were subject to many cross-pressures.

The joint effect of interest and cross-pressure can be seen by comparing bars 1 and 4—an effect which is very great indeed. People who had great interest and few cross-pressures were three times more likely to



make up their mind before the campaign. But only a quarter of those who did not care much about the political situation or found themselves under a number of cross pressures decided that early. Inversely, in the last weeks of the campaign, the propagandists dealt almost exclusively either with people who had no interest or with people who found themselves in a contradictory social and psychological situation.<sup>6</sup>

#### THE TOTAL EFFECT OF THE CAMPAIGN

Erie County had voted 58 per cent Democratic in 1936 and voted 46 per cent Democratic in 1940. When we entered the county in May, 1940, it had already a solid Republican majority, which increased only slightly in the course of the campaign. Here is the best indication that elections are decided by the events occurring in the entire period between two Presidential elections and not by the campaign. The evidence presented in this paper makes such a conclusion even more plausible.

The study of Erie County does not, to be sure, suggest that a party could give up campaigning and win. Propaganda has to reinforce and keep in line the vote intentions of the approximately 50 per cent of the voters who have made up their minds before the campaign starts. The campaign has, moreover, to activate the latent predispositions of most of those who are undecided. The campaign is like the chemical bath which develops a photograph. The chemical influence is necessary to bring out the picture, but only the picture pre-structured on the plate can come out.

Only a very small percentage of people can be considered so truly undecided that propaganda can still convert them, and those are likely to be of a special kind: not much interested and living in a social constellation which makes neither of the two candidates a very convincing solution. As a result, these people are especially sensitive to the social pressures around them; and if they finally make up their minds, their vote is likely to be proportional to the group influences exerted upon them. This means that in the end their decision will not considerably alter the ratio of Republican and Democratic vote intentions which existed prior to the beginning of the campaign.

<sup>6</sup> As can be seen from the base figures in Chart V, there exists a noteworthy relationship between cross-pressures and interest. One might have expected that people whose social situation contained conflicting elements became very alert to campaign events. This, however, is not the case. If a person belonged to a constellation where neither of the two candidates was a "natural" solution to his problems, the whole campaign seemed to be of less importance to him and he lost interest.